

THE AMERICAN DIPLOMA PROJECT

Update

The first phase of the American Diploma Project is well underway. Kentucky has joined four other states to align high school assessment and graduation standards with the performance demands for postsecondary study and the workplace. Our participation is a joint effort supported by the Council on Postsecondary Education, the Department of Education, the Committee on Equal Opportunity, the State P-16 Council, the Governor's Office, the Cabinet for Workforce Development, the Office of the New Economy, the Partnership for Kentucky Schools, the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, Kentucky Advocates for Higher Education, and the State AFL-CIO. (An executive summary is attached.)

In January, two teams of P-12 and postsecondary faculty (one for mathematics and one for language arts) from each of the five states met in Austin, Texas. They analyzed several high school and postsecondary assessment tools to identify gaps in what is assessed for accountability purposes at the secondary level and what is required for admissions and credit-level placement at the postsecondary level. The Kentucky teams examined the CATS 11th-grade mathematics assessment, the 12th-grade writing portfolio, the ACT and COMPASS, the new GED, and several college placement tests. Kentucky's mathematics team included the Early Mathematics Testing Program test, administered by Northern Kentucky University and the University of Kentucky, in its analysis. Gaps in secondary school assessments and workplace entrance tests, such as WorkKeys, will be analyzed soon.

Preliminary findings support the recommendations made last year by the P-16 Council's alignment teams.

- In language arts, the writing portfolio and its evaluation scale serve as effective predictors of college-level writing. In fact, the KDE writing portfolio is superior as a writing assessment to many postsecondary English placement tests. The portfolio does not, however, assess expository writing for postsecondary academic work. If an assessment of expository writing is added to the portfolio, team members are prepared to recommend that it be used for postsecondary admissions and placement purposes.
- In mathematics, the gap between secondary assessments and postsecondary requirements is wider. The primary gap is in assessment of upper level algebra. The CATS test does not adequately test upper-level algebra for postsecondary purposes. The GED is an even less adequate predictor of college-readiness. Neither is a score of 18 on the ACT—the Council on Postsecondary Education's minimum admissions requirement—an adequate predictor of readiness for college-level mathematics. The CATS assessment in mathematics would need modification before it can be used for college

admissions and placement purposes. Kentucky's gap analysis team in mathematics recommends that all high school students be required to take mathematics in all four years of high school and that this coursework include algebra I, geometry, and algebra II. It also recommends that postsecondary institutions provide alternative mathematics courses to undergraduates whose curriculum or major does not require college algebra.

Sheila Byrd, director of the American Diploma Project, based in Washington, D.C., will present an overview of the project.

Staff Preparation by Dianne M. Bazell and Lois Adams-Rodgers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Goals and Objectives

Achieve, Inc., the Education Trust, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the National Alliance of Business have joined forces to establish The American Diploma Project (ADP), an effort to help states **strengthen their ongoing standards-based reform efforts and analyze whether they have set the bar for high school graduation requirements in reading, writing and mathematics in the right place.**

The partners believe that an American high school diploma awarded in any state should, at the very least, represent a “greatest common factor” of basic literacy and numeracy, a level that will guarantee all graduates a range of choices beyond secondary school: the ability to attend a state college or university without the need for remediation, the assurance of a job that allows for promotion along a career path, or a professional placement in one of the nation’s armed forces.

Making standards-based assessment data matter in the world beyond secondary education is the best way to make good on the promise of standards-based reforms, which hold out our greatest hope that *all* our children will be exposed to the rich curricula and high expectations that can guarantee their success.

In order to achieve these broader goals, the project has **three objectives**, to:

- assist states in strengthening and/or revising their current standards-based systems;
- develop and solidify demand — from higher education and employers — for standards-based high school assessment data in their admissions and hiring process; and
- create new high school graduation benchmarks in English language arts and mathematics that *all* states may use to analyze the quality and rigor of their current standards and assessments.

State Partners

Five states, selected from among the fifteen states that applied, have become partners in the American Diploma Project. State team members from **Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Nevada and Texas** met on November 30 in Washington to begin developing their plans for implementing the project’s goals.

Workplan Summary

In the first year, project staff and representatives from partner states will conduct groundbreaking research to identify the knowledge and skills that all high school graduates need in order to succeed in the post-secondary worlds of college and work (see page two for details). When the research is complete in spring, 2001, partner states will know how closely aligned their current standards and assessments are to these real-world expectations. At that point, in each of the partner states, panels of representatives from K-12, higher education, business, policy, the military and other citizens’ groups will examine the results of the research together. With help from the project staff, the partner states will develop short- and long-range plans to begin using standards-based assessment data in college admissions and hiring practices, while also working to refine their current standards and assessments, if the research indicates that it is necessary to do so. By next September, we expect leaders in the partner states to be ready to announce their state plans.

In the second year, as workplans in the partner states are finalized, the project staff will begin developing national benchmarks in reading, writing and mathematics by sponsoring cross-state discussions among partner (and companion) states in order to compare findings, and by assembling a panel of national experts to establish the new benchmarks, with special consideration given to the research and to the benchmarks agreed upon within the partner states.

Research Methodology

There are three primary components of our research: one is state-based, and the other two are more national in scope. The research phase of the work will be conducted between November 2001 and April 2002.

1. Assessment gap analyses for partner states

Partner states' K-12 and higher education faculty representatives will work with the **Education Trust, Achieve** and project staff to compare their standards and assessments for 1) high school graduation, 2) college admission, and 3) college placement purposes. At the end of the analysis, states will have identified potential gaps among these expectations. National tests such as the SAT, ACT, GED and the ASVAB will be included in the analysis.

2. National workforce studies for high-performance occupations

The **National Alliance of Business** will work with project staff, partner state representatives and employers throughout the country to identify the knowledge and skills needed in those occupations projected to have strong trajectories of growth nationally over the next decade. The study will include the consideration of real work samples and the expectations of front-line managers. Our goal is to make explicit connections between the needs of employers and content of academic standards.

3. Review of the legal issues surrounding the use of standards-based assessment data

The use of standards-based assessment data for the purpose of college admissions and/or placement suggests the application of current law within new frameworks. Attorneys from Nixon-Peabody will examine existing legal standards and the ways in which legal standards might apply in a new "K-16" framework. They will anticipate the questions that might arise with regard to the consideration of standards-based assessment data as *one* criterion in high school graduation, college admissions or placement and employer hiring practices.

On-Going Technical Assistance for States

The project will nurture an on-going **public campaign to increase broad-based support for standards-based systems** (both within the partner states and nationally) by securing a commitment from higher education and business leaders to consider standards-based high school assessment data in their admissions and hiring practices.

Finally, the project will **assist states with the implementation of their standards-based systems**, the strengthening of their K-16 and business/education networks and the revision of current high school graduation standards and assessments, if necessary.

After working with this handful of states critical to standards-based reform, we may expand our work with other states after the new benchmarks are complete, so that a greater number of states may take advantage of our work over time.

Conclusion

Because information technology has changed the nature of work dramatically in the last ten years, it has become necessary to set new high school graduation benchmarks that will represent a new universal standard, developed from the bottom up, in consultation with key state leaders from each system: K-12, business, and higher education, as well as with citizens from wider state communities. The process of conducting new research and extrapolating the academic content from the real-world needs of higher education, business, and the military will ensure that the new benchmarks will reflect the knowledge and skills needed by every high school graduate, not just if they are headed directly for college, but also if they are headed for the workplace or the military after high school.

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THE AMERICAN DIPLOMA PROJECT

Aligning High School Academic Standards with Higher Education and New Economy Needs

Year One: June 2001 – June 2002

June – October	Recruit and select states Develop research workplans
October – November	Conduct state visits Convene strategy meeting
November – April	Complete gap analysis and workplace research
December	Complete preliminary legal research
April – June	Statewide panels meet to examine research

Year Two: June 2001 – June 2002

June – August	Develop state workplans and case studies
September	Announce state workplans
October – November	Convene cross-state advisory groups
November – December	Synthesize cross-state recommendations
January – March	Convene national panel to finalize new benchmarks
April	Solicit comments on new benchmarks
May – June	Publish new benchmarks